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"WERE TIRED OF GREAT CAUSES," F. SCOTT FITZGERALD wrote of his contemporaries after World War I. "It was characteristic of the Jazz Age that it had no interest in politics at all." It was characteristic of Fitzgerald himself. Yet Fitzgerald's most famous book, The Great Gatsby, raises essential political questions: What does it mean to live well, and on what terms people can live together? And it suggests how America answers them.

Readers will remember that in The Great Gatsby the narrator, Nick Carraway, tells the story of his summer outside New York City on Long Island. There he witnesses, and is drawn into, the conflict between philandering, old-monied Tom Buchanan and the mysterious Jay Gatsby, who adores Tom's wife Daisy, a cousin of Nick's. The novel begins with Nick's reminiscence:

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since. "Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone," he told me, "just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages you've had." He didn't say any more but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that.

Mr. Carraway gives young Nick advice millions of American fathers have given their sons, instructing him to think no worse of someone who has less money. It's worth remembering that Nick is the only middle-class character in The Great Gatsby; as the critic Ronald Berman put it, "Nick rents, Gatsby buys, the Buchanans inherit." Mr. Carraway's advice appears to be a reworking of the self-evident truth in the Declaration of Independence, that all men are created equal. The corollary of the message that "you're no better than anybody else" is that "no one else is any better than you." It's hard to imagine a sentiment more American, or more democratic.

The beginning of, and the basis for, The Great Gatsby is the beginning and basis for America. But the passage of time makes it difficult to retain the simple faith in the principles inherited from our fathers, founding or biological. Nick Carraway is "still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth."

His father's advice, as Nick has come to interpret it, emphasizes the moral rather than the material differences between people. It is not advantages or opportunities that are parcelled out unequally, but "fundamental decencies." The softs rendering of the father's adage has turned it upside down. Some people really are better than others.

Nick gives no evidence of having repudiated his father or the advice he gave, of having embraced as self-evident the truth that all men are created unequal. Rather, we see the interplay between the moral and the material at work in Nick's own life. Even as his father's advice provides the moral basis for considering the characters and events Nick encounters in the course of The Great Gatsby, his father's money provides the material basis that allows him to have these experiences. Mr. Carraway runs a wholesale hardware business started by his uncle, which provides the wherewithal to finance Nick for one year while, restless after World War I, the young man goes to New York to try to establish himself in the bond business. When Nick left he thought he was moving permanently to the East, but he returns after only a few months. His father's generosity was not withdrawn, but his father's principles, no matter how many times Nick turned them over in his mind, did not equip him to accept what he saw and did during his months away from home:

After boasting this way about my tolerance, I come to the admission that it has a limit. Conduct may be founded on the hard rock or the wet marshes but after a certain point I don't care what it's founded on. When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart.

No sooner does Nick inform us that he takes exception to his father's rule, than he tells us there is an exception to this exception: "Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction--Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have unaffected scorn." This retrospective judgment previews the opinion Nick expresses to Gatsby directly:

"They're a rotten crowd," I shouted, across the lawn. "'You're worth the whole damn bunch put together." I've always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end.

Nick may disapprove of Gatsby and scorn everything he represents, but Nick judges Gatsby with a leniency he does not extend to Tom Buchanan, even though Nick "always had the opinion [Tom] approved of me and wanted me to like him with some harsh, defiant wistfulness of his own." Nick's final judgment on Tom comes at the very end of the book, when Tom confirms that he was complicit in Gatsby's murder:

I couldn't forgive him or like him, but I saw that what he had done was, to him, entirely justified.... I shook hands with him; it seemed silly not to, for I felt suddenly as if I were talking to a child.

Nick's different opinions of Gatsby and Tom Buchanan are beset by tensions. Even as Nick praises Gatsby, he expresses disdain for him; and, in keeping with his father's advice as he has come to understand it, even as Nick condemns Tom, he allows for Tom's meager ration of the fundamental decencies. The moral drama of The Great Gatsby involves coming to our own judgment about why Gatsby is fundamentally admirable for Nick, while Tom is fundamentally contemptible.

Jay Gatsby and Tom Buchanan are both immensely rich and are both pursuing, albeit with different motives and sentiments, love affairs with other men's wives. The distinction Nick makes between them is based on finer-grain differences, ones that concern the interplay between the material and the moral. Tom Buchanan was born rich and Gatsby was born poor. The matter is more complicated than saying that Nick approves of the wealthy man who acquires a fortune while disapproving of the wealthy man who inherits one. Rather, Gatsby has acquired his wealth for a high motive, a motive that expresses an exceptional sensitivity. Tom Buchanan uses his inherited fortune for low motives that reflect his negligible concern for other people.

These different judgments are shown in well-known passages about each character. Regarding Gatsby, Nick says:

[T]here was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. This responsiveness ... was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again.

As for Buchanan (and his wife), "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy--they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they made...."

Gatsby scores no points with Nick for having risen far from humble beginnings. If Gatsby were simply a man on the make he would be no better than Tom's mistress Myrtle, who wants to trade up from a husband who had to borrow the suit he was married in to one who "brought down a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest." Nick's circumstances are such that he knows something about both inheriting money and trying to rise in the world. His g eat uncle s wholesale hardware business has put a floor beneath him; no matter what happens in the bond business he won't be living in ash heaps and working in a garage. But the floor is not so high that he needn't work, either in a field that he chooses and succeeds in or, as a fallback, in the family business.

Nick feels a palpable repugnance for the Myrtle Wilsons of the world, who have no floor and no fallback. Nick's confidence about the social distance that separates him from Myrtle allows him to mock the pretensions Tom's money allows her: "Myrtle raised her eyebrows in despair at the shiftlessness of the lower orders. 'These people! You have to keep after them all the time.'" Myrtle Wilson is exactly the sort of person whom Mr. Carraway's advice, and Nick's reflections on it, should have prepared him to judge generously. There is a clear connection between the material disadvantages she has known and the paucity of her allotment of the fundamental decencies. None of this earns her any credit with Nick.

At the opposite economic extreme, the fundamental decency denied Tom Buchanan is that his enormous wealth has afflicted him with a plenary sense of entitlement. He expects his wife to love him, he expects other men's wives to be his mistresses, and then he expects his own wife to be endlessly forbearing when he humiliates her by barely bothering to conceal his affairs. (Tom interrupts an excursion with Nick, his wife's cousin, to insist, "I want you to meet my girl.") Feeling himself to have been spoiled, not by his father's money but by his mother's indulgence, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote to his daughter, "I didn't know till 15 that there was anyone in the world except me." Tom Buchanan is twice that old and still doesn't know, and never will.

Gatsby started out living like the Wilsons and ended up living like the Buchanans, but Nick thinks better of him than of any of them. What redeems Gatsby is his love for Daisy. The fact that Nick ends by finding Daisy unworthy of Gatsby's devotion makes him think more, not less, of Gatsby's passion for her. What recommends Gatsby to Nick is not the quality of his judgment but the intensity of his longing. The impracticality of Gatsby's desire is inseparable from the purity of it, the absence of venal calculations that would sully it. Gatsby has broken laws and done business with gangsters to get fabulously wealthy in the quickest possible way. He hasn't done this in order to climb socially so that someday, after time has sanitized his fortune, his son might marry Tom and Daisy's daughter. Rather, he got rich quick out of a sense of urgency and desperation and crazy hopefulness, out of refusing to get over a broken heart and give up the love of his life.

IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT THE TWO SENSES OF THE WORD "ROMANtic" are related. That is, there is a connection between the erotic desire of lovers and the idealistic preoccupation with grandeur, magnanimity, and transcendence of the sordid and mundane. F. Scott Fitzgerald, in his fiction and his life, was a romantic in both senses. Lionel Trilling made the point this way: "Fitzgerald was perhaps the last notable writer to affirm the Romantic fantasy, descended from the Renaissance, of personal ambition and heroism, of life committed to, or thrown away for, some ideal of self." Like Don Quixote, Jay Gatsby moved from the romantic love of a woman to the romantic conviction that the hard realities of this world can be made to yield to a steadfast heart and a vaulting spirit, to one's "Platonic conception of himself." That neither Dulcinea nor Daisy is a suitable object for this erotic desire doesn't count decisively against Don Quixote or Gatsby. No woman of flesh and bone could be worthy of such idealization, and both men turn out to be more in love with love than with their beloved. "In any case, it was just personal," says Gatsby when he tries to take in the knowledge that Daisy never loved him the way he loved her.

"The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function," wrote Fitzgerald in "The Crack-Up." None of the three men in The Great Gatsby scores high on this test. Gatsby and Buchanan don't even try. Rather, each takes one of the two most important ideas, and lives as though its opposite doesn't even exist. Gatsby is utterly true to his heart's desire, but foolishly, childishly acts as though the world's ineluctable realities can be disregarded just because they make us sad. Buchanan sees the world clearly, but there is no more a trace of music in his soul than there is of softness in his "cruel body." As the late English literary critic A.E. Dyson said of Tom, "Being right about the nature of things is no excuse for being inhuman"

Nick, alone, can see the stars while keeping his feet on the ground. He is not enough of a romantic to let a passion like Gatsby's into his own life, but is enough of one to know and admire that passion when he sees it in someone else. And Nick does live in the world, not so massively or brutally as Tom, of course, but enough to be more impressed than scandalized when he meets the man who fixed the 1919 World Series.

So Nick does have the ability to hold two opposite ideas in his mind at the same time. Whether he retains the ability to function is a separate question. The elegiac voice of The Great Gatsby, Nick's voice, is that of an emotional convalescent. Nick, hardly ancient, turns thirty on the climactic day of Gatsby's story but regards himself as a male spinster. "Thirty--the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasm, thinning hair." His emotional disengagement from domestic life is complete. The one thing he says to Daisy about her two-year old daughter is, "I suppose she talks and--eats, and everything."

After drifting into a passionless romance with Jordan Baker, Daisy's morally flexible friend, Nick drifted out of it: "We talked like that for a while and abruptly we weren't talking any longer. I don't know which of us hung up with a sharp dick but I know I didn't care" Seeing Jordan before he leaves New York is the final loose end Nick attends to.Jordan ends by calling him a "bad driver," the sort of careless person a careless person like herself needs to avoid. Nick accepts her opinion of him by not disputing it.

"Careless," of course, is the final judgment Nick renders on Tom and Daisy Buchanan, and the fact that Daisy is, in every sense, a bad driver is the final link guaranteeing the story's tragic ending. His own voice, not full Of money but winning us with its beguiling fastidiousness, makes us want to think better of Nick than of the Buchanans. But it's hard not to wonder if there isn't something to what Jordan says: that in the end he is uncomfortably similar to his second cousin, and she, in turn, is uncomfortably similar to her odious husband.

When he first visits the Buchanans in East Egg, and learns the outlines of Tom's philandering and Daisy's misery, Nick's reaction is Victorian. "It seemed to me that the thing for Daisy to do was to rush out of the house, child in arms--but apparently there were no such intentions in her head." On the contrary, "she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged."

So limited are Tom Buchanan's moral faculties and powers of imagination that his culpability in Gatsby's demise is qualified. To Tom, Gatsby is just "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere." But Daisy and Nick don't have the excuse of blindness to Gatsby's singular virtues. The fact that they do see Gatsby but still reject him--Daisy as the love of her life, Nick as an inspiration for his--makes their repudiation uglier. It's not that there was an easy way for Daisy to let Gatsby's love into her life, or for Nick to make a place in his life for a love like it. It's that both were given a glimpse of something exalted and rare, then struggled only a little before choosing to remain earth-bound. Gravity pulls Daisy back to Tom and pulls Nick back to the Midwest, the wholesale hardware business, and his thinning brief-case of enthusiasm.

Holding two opposed ideas in mind at the same time was, for Aristotle, something that required more than just the ability to function and demonstrated a quality larger than a first-rate intelligence. "The work of man is achieved only in accordance with practical wisdom as well as moral virtue; for virtue makes us aim at the right mark, and practical wisdom makes us take the right means." The Great Gatsby, by portraying the difficulty of this task in such a haunting way, is a book that any reader, anywhere, can find moving and bracing. But Gatsby is not Everyman. He is an American, and the struggle to fashion a life guided by practical wisdom in America faces special challenges that make his story even more poignant. These special challenges concern, again, something moral, the principles on which the American experiment is founded, and something material, the place where it unfolds.

JOHN DEWEY THOUGHT THAT THE SOLUTION FOR THE PROBLEMS OF democracy was more democracy. In A Theory of Justice John Rawls writes, "democracy in judging each other's aims is the foundation of self-respect in a well-ordered society." But the question is not so simple or soothing. Can democracy encompass human greatness? Can it, that is, provide fertile ground for greatness and then accord it the proper deference when it does emerge? If it should turn out that democracy is in some way fundamentally inhospitable to greatness, then there is the prospect that the civilization produced by democracy will be--however just, generous and comfortable--pallid, trivial and, in the end, more than a little sad.

A more serious attempt to wrestle with the problem of democracy and greatness is suggested by Lionel Trilling. The very rich "seem to have been the nearest thing to an aristocracy that America could offer [Fitzgerald], and we cannot be too simple about ... the artist's frequent 'taste for aristocracy, his need--often quite open--of a superior social class with which he can make some fraction of common cause--enough, at any rate, to account for his own distinction.'"

The loneliness that pervades Gatsby, that Nick Carraway sees all around him, was seen by Alexis de Tocqueville as well. "[Democracy] constantly leads [each man] back toward himself alone and threatens finally to confine him solely in the solitude of his own heart." This sense of isolation from others is connected to being isolated in time, to living one's life only for oneself. "In aristocratic peoples ... [a] man almost always knows his ancestors and respects them; he believes he already perceives his great-grandsons and he loves them. He willingly does his duty by both" By contrast, when Myrtle Wilson first laid eyes on Tom, "All I kept thinking about over and over was 'You can't live forever. You can't live forever.'"

The tragedy of Gatsby suggests a paradox about America: our moral principles, the fundamental commitment to equality voiced by Mr. Carraway at the beginning of the book, are a source of stability and sobriety for Americans, while our material circumstances, the "fresh, green breast of the new world," let our imaginations soar. Even as the New World was seen as a new Eden, where mankind was given a second and last chance to author a new, better history for itself, Americans see their country as a place where anyone can create a new future, or even a new past. The most American, most winning, and most disquieting thing about Jay Gatsby is his casual assurance that nothing is settled merely because it has already happened. If we don't like the hand we're dealt, the world we live in, we have the right and duty to call for a new one.

An America full of Jay Gatsbys would be a convulsive, disordered, impossible place to live. But an America with no one like Gatsby, no such heroes in its life or fiction, would be, in its way, unendurable, too. To miss what is great about Gatsby is to miss something essential to what is great about America. The problem posed by Tocqueville remains: to make the world safe for a greatness like Gatsby's while keeping it safe from such a greatness.

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